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AUTHOR Wolf, Mary Alice
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ABSTRACT

Older learners are often led into adult education by a quest for self-development and the wish to make meaning of the human experience. Adult educators should explore and appreciate the process of human development in the last stage. In old age there can be a merging of the knowledge of the body (life's stories) and of the spirit (developmental potential). The total population of persons over 65 is 31 million. Annually, 30 percent of the senior population participates in adult education courses. Educational gerontologists hesitate to stereotype older workers; they cannot always describe the "market." Older learners engage in three processes: learning and meaning making, learning and the shadow self, and learning and cognitive reordering. The adult educator can respond with greater understanding of the older learner in the following ways: (1) clearing the learning environment of stereotypical factors; (2) achieving a greater appreciation of all human development; (3) exploring the processes by which learners achieve integrity and joy; and (4) adopting curricula and experiences that enhance the learning potential of older adults. Guidelines for educators of older adults are as follows: (1) older persons should not be mythologized; (2) older adults need morale-building environments; and (3) responsive educators should listen to the intrapsychic voices of their clientele. (Samples of prose and poetry are included and 35 references are attached.) (NLA)

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THE OLDER LEARNER

by

Mary Alice Wolf

Saint Joseph College
West Hartford, Connecticut

Paper presented to the Annual Conference of The Northeastern Gerontological Society, Albany, New York, April 19, 1991.

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It may even seem that affective dynamic factors provide the key to all mental development and that in the last analysis it is the need to grow, to assert oneself, to love, and to be admired that constitutes the motive force of intelligence, as well as of behavior in its totality and in its increasing complexity.

Jean Piaget

Each older adult learner represents a complex inner world, the result of lifelong stimuli, emotion, and experiences in cognitive and cultural realms. Childhood, early life experience, family "legacies," adult work, love, losses and renewals connect and reconnect, often in new ways, as we age. Old grievances reemerge, unbidden, into consciousness. Old friends, long gone, touch our daydreams. The memory, deeply personal, resonates with former visions of ourselves, tasks never fully completed, unresolved relationships, abandoned dreams. The future has come: it is the time we have waited for. Yet it is always a surprise, and self-development remains a vibrant possibility.

We begin to discern these merging notes in middle age, but we hear the full symphony in old age, the culmination of all human experience. Elders live in the present, but can glean meaning from an enriched past and energy through engagement with the future. Older learners are often led into adult education by a quest for self-development and the wish to make meaning of the human experience. This essay looks at learning from inside that world and attempts to articulate the process of self-development in the older learner. Its goal is to encourage adult educators to explore and appreciate the process of human development in the last stage, the harvest of life.

When Does Old Age Begin?

Adulthood is a state of mind. We know that there are ages and rites of passage along the way, but full adulthood involves an awareness of our mortality and the creation of a self that takes command of its attempts to organize experience. Adulthood can be seen as an unloading of the baggage of early life. Jerome Kagan, the child psychologist, writes:

> My own image of a life is that of a traveler whose knapsack is slowly filled with doubts, dogma, and desires during the first dozen years. Each traveler spends the adult years trying to empty the heavy load in the knapsack until he or she can confront the opportunities that are present in each fresh day. (Kagan, 1984, p. 280)

The older adult, simply by virtue of time-spent-in-living, is the most complex of all individuals. Old age is indeed an opportunity. Only in older adulthood--that grey area after the passing of middle age--does the human being begin to understand what it means to be "developed." "In old age," says Heschel in Barbara Myerhoff's (1979) classic study of elderly Jews,

> we got a chance to find out what a human being is, how we could be worthy of being human. You could find in yourself courage, and know you are vital. Then you're living on a different plane. To do thls you got to use your brain, but that's not enough. The brain is combined with the soul. (p. 198)

In old age there can be a merging of the knowledge of the body--life's stories--and of the spirit--the developmental potential of the human being. There can be a sense of culmination and completion, what Erikson (1982) calls "integrality."

Generalizations and Related Educational Implications

Current demographic trends alert us to a great increase in the numbers of older Americans. Life expectancy in the United States has increased dramatically from 49 years at the turn of the century to 76 today. The total population of persons over 65 was 3.1 million in 1900; today it is approximately 31 million. Over-65-year-olds constituted less than 5 percent of the United States population in 1900; today they make up 12 percent. In the year 2030, the projected population of persons over 65 will comprise 21.1 percent of the United States citizenry (U.S. Census Bureau, 1989).

Moody (1988) states that 30 percent of the senior population participates in adult education courses each year. There are 1,000 colleges which include elders in classes for credit or audit (Mature Market Report, 1988, p. 10), and 900,000 persons over the age of 65 enrolled in high school or college courses in October of 1986 (U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, 1987, p. 143). Levels of education differ by cohort (age), region, and race. The older one is, the lower the educational level is likely to be. For example, 42 percent of persons over 75 are high s 1 graduates compared with 67 percent of persons aged 65 (U.S. Special Committe on Aging, 1989).

In numbers, older learners outwit the surveyors. Elders are the wily fish in the lake who yearly elude the hook. We count them; they frequently populate our adult learning centers and attend Elderhostels. Yet when we prepare our classrooms, older adults may not appear. Curriculum planners scratch their heads, having made elaborate continuing education plans for this elusive "demographic bump." Hiemstra (1985) found that older adults sought learning projects for varied reasons. The majority, however, claimed to learn for "personal enjoyment" and for "self-fulfillment." Surveys, however, can distort the elder population. This is because, while older adults may have similar characteristics, they are often more unalike than at any other time in the life-span.

Educational gerontologists hesitate to stereotype older persons. As learners, they come ready to pentrate the practitioner's own privately held assumptions about aging. "Will Mr. Smith hear what I'm saying? Is he sleeping or merely listening deeply? Must Mrs. Hendrick <u>always</u> disagree with what I'm saying? Is she hostile? Is it true that elders love to reminisce? (This I have learned in the research on aging.) Then why does Mrs. Amsted refuse to reminisce? And why has Miss Olger declined to come to class on 'senior evenings' when she is clearly the right age?" As curriculum developers, we can not always describe our "market."

Nonetheless, by using older learners' stories as testimony or data bases, adult educators <u>can</u> reflect on the learning process in which many older learners engage and to help plan for them. The following discussion identifies three such processes. These have been heard in older learners' discussions of their educational experiences. While the processes may overlap, I have distinguished them for our observations as follows: learning and meaning-making, learning and the shadow self, and learning and cognitive reordering.

The first, "learning and meaning-making," is found in older learners who may seek enrichment programs such as courses in history, genealogy, philosophy, and ethics. The second, "learning and the shadow self," involves the development of skills or characteristics which hitherto have not been part of the older adult's repertoire or represent an early-life interest left aside. The third, "learning and cognitive reordering," involves an alertness and mindfulness in which the older learner experiences him or herself in a new and vital way. An overview of current developmental theory will set the framework for a discussion of these learning needs.

The Developmental Perspective

Curiosity about the intrapsychic process of older persons is not new. We have always wondered about the inner workings of the mature mind. Is it creative? Dotty? Radicalized by the freeing of gender roles and the realization that life is not as settled as we once thought at our grandmother's knee? Ancient lore tells us that life is a continuum of meaning-making:

> 20 for seeking a livelihood
> 30 for attaining full strength
> 40 for understanding
> 50 for giving counsel
> 60 for becoming an elder
> 70 for white hair
> 80 for Gevurah (new, special strength of age)
> 90 for being bent under the weight of the years
>
> from "The Sayings of the Fathers"
> of The Talmud, Levinson (1978)

Developmentalists agree that old age is a time of harvest, a time for meaning-making which includes the Eriksonian (1963) task of "integrity." This is the culmination of one's development, a stage marked by acceptance and satisfaction in one's own historical moment. There is oneness, a sense of "world order," writes Erikson, "only in him who in some way has taken care of the things and people and has adapted himself to the triumphs and disappointments adherent to being" (1963, p. 268). This can be a time for reminiscence touched by evaluation and achievement of late life satisfaction. Robert Butler (1982) has described a process life review. He writes:

> Old age is a period when there is unique developmental work to be accomplished. Childhood might be broadly defined as a period of gathering and enlarging strength and experience, whereas the major developmental task in old age is to clarify, deepen and find use for what one has already obtained in a lifetime of learning and adapting. (p. 20)

Learning and Meaning-Making

We may find that the deepest of human cravings, the need to find meaning in one's own life experience, often motivates personal learning in old age. Older adults study philosophy, literature, and history as they reflect on their own personal development. This can be a conscious or unconscious agenda in taking adult education courses. Through a seemingly magic process by which the long-term memory takes over and the past comes into focus with astounding clarity, older learners often find new meaning in guided recollection and in reminiscence.

They are said to be "settling accounts" through the "universal and normative" process of life review (Butler, 1982).

A Polish refugee now studying history and psychology says, "I want to put together the bits and pieces to make a picture of my life." A 79-year-old man reminisced in music class:

> If you hear a piece of music--it might be a popular piece of music or it might be serious music--your thoughts wander back to the time you heard it before. Maybe back fifty years. It might put you in the mood that you perhaps were in at that time.

Paolo, a 69-year old retired laborer, found that <u>all</u> learning activities stirred memories of his days as a young merchant marine. In a literacy class which dealt with weather, his reminiscence was triggered, past and present were fused:

> Of course writing about the snow brought back memories of being up on the bridge when you're steering the ship. And going to Egypt and there are three stars always together. Three in a row and one on the side. And we use. . . we steer by them stars to get us to our destination. And if there is a storm brewing, the same way. I just get reminded of that out of the blue!

The process of life review can motivate one to participate in adult education experience, or it can be the natural result of the interactions or content of the class. In a psychology class, Gertrude, age 82, found herself learning about theories of education. She reflected in her journal on the happy days she knew in elementary school and the fact that she hadn't continued her education:

> I'm not saying that I'm satisfied. You make the best of the situation and accept it. Certainly I understand now that my parents did all they could for us. And you know, I would have loved nothing better than to have gone on to college and gone on and on and on, but now I just figure, "I had to make the best of my life." And that's what I did.

There is a burgeoning literature of curriculum related to reminiscence and the classroom (for example, Kaminsky, 1984; Mulhall & Rowe, 1988; Wolf, 1989; and others.) Examples of specific use of this phenomenon are: keeping a journal, collecting oral histories, creating drama from early life experiences (Perlstein, 1981; Telander, Quinlan & Verson, 1982), creating "memory clubs" (Myerhoff, 1979), doing intergenerational biographical projects (Boss, 1990),and writing autobiographically (Hately, 1982). Humanities courses, current social policy, psychology curricula, even geography workshops can trigger the reminiscent mode. Although this way of relating to content may motivate many older learners, elders' reminiscence is not <u>always</u> operative. As we have learned in adult education planning, "If you've met one older adult learner, you've met one older learner. Don't count on a trend."

<u>Learning and the Shadow Self</u>

Many older adults are moving into new roles, experimenting with parts of their personalities which were quiescent in earlier life stages. Gutmann (1980), for example, has identified a shifting of gender roles in older adulthood. Women, free of the "parental imperative," may explore the assertive side of their personalty.

Men, conversely, may now develop their "feminine" selves, their nurturing and creative areas which have been untapped in the structured work-world. Jung (1933) described middle age as a turning point in psychic development, a time for exploration of our fuller selves:

> We might compare masculinity and femininity with their psychic components to a particular store of substances of which, in the first half of life, unequal use is made. A man consumes his large supply of masculine substance and has left over only the smaller amount of feminine substance, which he must now put to use. It is the other way round with a woman; she allows her unused supply of masculinity to become active.
>
> This transformation weighs more heavily still in the psychic realm than in the physical. How often it happens that a man of forty or fifty years winds up his business, and that his wife then dons the trousers and duties of handyman. (pp. 107-108)

While younger generations may not agree with the unliberated images of Jung's gender splitting, we may find examples of growth in older persons who adhered to traditional sex roles. Individuals now in their sixties and seventies belong to a cohort which was raised to identify "men's work" as out of the home and

"women's work" as caretaking, feeling, and responding to beauty. Women now may turn to education to train in new careers. Carlotta, age 67, found herself in a community college setting for the first time in her life. Although she was uncomfortable in the academic mileau, she wanted to study special education:

> I want to get the necessary education that I need to go further into this business. So I can know how to deal with the handicapped, you know. Everyone has to be treated different; there are no two alike. I need a learning process that will help me in that field. . .I'm here for something and I want to accomplish it.

Wuschko, a retired janitor, described the meaning he found in reading literature:

> For me it's study for its own sake, or the sake of its beauty. I'm retired now, my most urgent obligations fulfilled. My son finished his education. And now I feel I'm free to indulge myself in certain things that I didn't do before.

Personality theorists tell us that we are basically the same throughout our lives (Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1984, Neugarten, 1979). By this they do not mean to say that we do not change, but rather, that we grow and develop within a structure

that is unique to each of us. Imagine that we are all given a hand of cards at birth, and that throughout life we continue to play these cards, exploring and experimenting with our selfhood. Many older persons are doing just that when they enter the educational world: playing out a card that they have not yet tried. It is the skilled adult educator who sees beyond the sameness of dress style or color of hair in older persons, and sees instead the experimenting and exploring individual coming to class to carry out a personal mandate.

Learning and Cognitive Reordering

An overlapping paradigm of development involves a cognitive shift which is reflective. The learner is led through a series of activities (both self-directed and serendipitous) because of a wish to experiment, to explore. She is aware of the myths of aging so readily distributed in the media and inculcated in her earlier life: that older persons are failing and incapable of learning. Yet, sensing herself in a new way, she finds that her expectation of older adulthood is not valid; she is still there, and vibrantly so. This is a discovery. The individual feels newly autonomous. Sophie, age 70, finds her ability startling:

> Yes. I think that real learning wakes a person up. I believe that very strongly. The idea is just not to remain static. That is perhaps the most important thing, isn't it? I mean, how does one become a person but to change, to keep risking, trying out new ways of looking at things?

Madeline H., 74-years-old, wrote the following in an adult education class:

Was I once a fish
long and flat and round of eye?
White-fine bone in classic structure,
Glistening scale in primal pattern,
Gliding through the silent seasons,
Soundless, mindless,
Knowing only fish fulfillment--
Was I?

The poem, she says, represents her personal growth in the ten years since she began her education. Her current life is confining, as she cares for an ill husband and seldom goes out. Her primary "selfish" experience is her weekly adult education class. Without it, she says, she would return to the stagnant world of the fish, her former self. She writes:

Life
Leave it? Never!
Taller than chimneys, lighter than smoke,
Warm as the sun, fair as the sounds
of spring, Being
shall occupy all.

Rising complete with loosened loveliness
that melts all imperfect bonds
The spirit shall turn to
Immortal form.

Madeline represents the seeker of learning whose process is deeply personal and who is enriched by interacting with a world of spirit. She comes to class to expand this development and is nourished through interaction with peers and teachers. The opportunity for self-expression is essential to her well-being at this time in her life.

There is also pleasure in play in the last part of life. The concept is not new to theorists and researchers who have observed elders engaged in word games such as Bingo. Indeed, Piaget (1962) found a direct relationship between cognitive development and play, stressing the vast array of inventions by which the individual understands and assimilates to the environment. The elder, with a developmental mandate to achieve wisdom, may need to experiment and relive the inventive phases of childhood exploration and cognitive reordering. Stone (1989) defines "play" as follows:

> I consider play to be <u>any</u> activity undertaken for its own sake. . .Only humans undertake actions simply because they are choice-worthy, and these actions constitute what is most noble in human affairs. (pp. 64-65)

There is an ongoing need to play, of which Erikson observed, "We regard lifelong expressions of playfulness, throughout the work ethos as well as in recreation and creativity. . ." (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986).

In this third form of learning, the individual may wish to be connected to others. There may be a restlessness, a need to touch and be part of the world. It is a fear of human loss, of impoverishment. We can say, "I am awake; I am here." There is pleasure of survivorship and a continued investment in living.

This level (or category) is marked by awareness, or attention to the experience. Learning is an extension of this process, a realization of the self which is zestful. Cognitive reordering involves a creative tension, a wish to be more fully alive. As Csikszentmihalyi (1990) says, "Attention is our most important tool in the task of improving the quality of experience" (p. 33). The learner involved in this process is curious about a wide variety of content and seeks a heightened interaction with the environment. Theorists describe this cognitive level as wisdom, crystalized intelligence:

> it appears desirable to focus on the basic notion of crystallized intelligence as a "developmentally higher-level" factor covering culturally influenced, individually acquired and maintained abilities for understanding and thinking. (Dittmann-Kohli & Baltes, 1990, p. 58)

Continuing Education and the Older Learner

How does the adult educator respond with a greater understanding of the older learner? First, by clearing the learning environment of stereotypical and belittling factors; second, by achieving a greater appreciation of all human development--including her own; third, by exploring the processes by which learners achieve integrity and joy; fourth, by adopting curricula and experiences which enhance the learning potential of older adults.

Educational gerontologists have long debated the advantages and disadvantages of the single-age classroom. Do cohorts fare better when they are isolated? Are older persons' learning needs best met in single-age or cross generational environments? Are intergenerational activities more valuable? Surely, there is no single answer. Successful programs such as the Elderhostel have defined their mission as "guided by the needs of older citizens for intellectual stimulation and physical adventure" (Ventura, 1982). These have provided thousands of hours of classroom experiences and continue to thrive. On the other hand, integrated classroom experiences have also been developed with success in community college and adult learning centers. And private informal learning activities have also been estimated as important for "self-fulfillment" (Hiemstra, 1985). It is important to note that many older persons regard as essential to their comfort friendly environments, including safe transportation, daylight hours, and good light and sound (Wolf, 1986). Emotional barriers to classroom participation are often surmountable once older adults have been immersed in the activity at hand.

Outreach activities are also needed for institutionalized elders whose attention span, locus of control, and selfhood can be revived through stimulating experiences. We must shift our perceptions of how to nourish physically frail elders. A volunteer in a nursing home wrote the following about her Monday morning group:

> I have been continuing to offer my workshop, now titled "Humanities," to a group of seniors at the Hebrew Home. I started with five and we now

usually have anywhere from fifteen to twenty people. What a joy it is to share readings with these people! I have witnessed a genuine flowering of their personalities. Many were very shy and withdrawn and now they are not only verbal but show their feelings of sadness or laughter.

But what is most amazing to me is how mentally sharp they are and what wisdom they have to share. We have covered so many topics from "Zen and the Art of Seeing" to Haiku poetry to going "On the Road with Charles Kuralt." Now they are bringing in poetry they have written to share with the group and reminiscing with their own stories from the past.

I experimented by bringing a dementia patient into the group one week. She hummed her way down the halls and I thought her humming to herself might be a problem while I was reading. I asked another volunteer to stay for a while in the group just in case this resident wouldn't be quiet. To my surprise, not only was she silent during the readings, but she listened intently and responded at approriate times with the appropriate emotions. It occurred to me that it <u>is</u> possible to offer programs like this to dementia patients in beginning stages of the disease.

When I first came to the group I was very aware of their infirmities. Now I see them much more as people than as patients. (Atkins, 1991)

It is essential that the adult educator support the older learner's foray into any classroom setting. Often older persons are intimidated by the academic milieu, particularly when they have not been in school situations for many years. Many older learners do not have college degrees; often they attribute a degree of authority to teachers that is a carryover from the 1930's and 1940's. The classroom is a "holding environment" (Kegan, 1982) just like any home or institution. Trust, the basic fabric of all holding environments, must be established. And a spirit of appreciation for the life each learner brings into the experience is important. The classroom can be a place of growth and self-development, comradeship and joy.

Methods of Paulo Freire (the "dialogical teacher") may energize elders. This is a process of listening, going with the tenor of an individual group, and addressing issues of social condition (1968). Applications of this system have included a model developed in a housing project for seniors (Maklan,1987). Also, educational activities based on life review develop a climate for reflection and cognitive strength because of the continued reliance on long-term memory. These include autobiographical writing in all genres; discussion of history, geography, politics and culture of neighborhoods and communities where adults have lived for many years; reminiscences of family and birthplaces; also, aesthetics, sexuality, cross-generational issues, music, and ethics. Elders do, however, often enjoy lectures.

"Playfulness," again, is pivotal in designing curriculum. A recent interview with a professor of Icelandic literature at a community college revealed her amazement at the size of her class and the zest with which the older adults plunged into the field:

> I don't understand it. In the middle of winter, these folks drive up to an hour each way to come to class. There are 40 of them! And they contribute and discuss. And they do all the readings. I've never had a class like that!

The Role of the Teacher

Working with the older learner is a reciprocal process, warmth is often the key to interchange. The learner requires the teacher to be genuine, authentic. "Learned" models of pedagogy or andragogy will not replace the actual comfort level that can be reached when the teacher is herself.

Expectations based on preconceived assumptions about older persons will fail. Recently, at a summer Elderhostel, a young English professor found her class uncooperative, even hostile. Dr. H. had been told to facilitate discussion: under no circumstances, she had been warned, was she to lecture. "Older adults want discussion," the Elderhostel director had admonished. This was unfortunate, as the class did want Dr. H. to lecture: "That's what we're paying for," commented one participant. The class members had not read the texts under discussion, had no background in the field, and grew impatient with Dr. H's "withholding information" from them. When an emotional Dr. H. finally asked, "What's wrong?" She was told that the group was tired of hearing themselves relate their own experience. She gladly lectured on literary motifs for the next two days and the class ended happily.

Conclusions, Cautions and Phenomenology

1. Older persons should not be mythologized. Do not make older people into sentimental objects. Often educators stamp the older person as "quaint." Growing older does not alter one's lifelong persona: one is not suddenly "wise" or "frail." Hilda M., age 72, stated:

> I will confess to you--I'm old. But it's nothing like what you see on the outside. You see an old lady and you think she's thinking this and that. I'm the same me inside and I know what it's like to be 18 and to be 40. I'm going all the time inside and I want to keep on going. I thought I'd be all finished with some of this thinking about myself by this age, but I'm not, I'm certainly not.

2. Older adults often need morale-building environments. Let us reeducate the scores of older adults who would diminish their own lives by hiding behind outdated stereotypes. And let us find ways to incorporate the freedom of growth and development rather than decline into our school-wide curricula. Many older people fear the loss of cognitive abilities. They equate "school" with tests and judgmental instructors, and often feel threatened by the perceived loss of intellectual ability. Educators would do well to introduce recollective discussions into the classroom. Here, older learners' experiences with such elements as business cycles, wars, and weather provice useful background for information.

With growing numbers of better educated older persons entering classrooms in future years, we will need to revise curricula further.

3. The responsive adult educator should listen to the intrapsychic voices of her older adult clientele. If the adult educator doesn't appreciate what's in the world of the older learner, she cannot expect to touch their lives. She might adopt the attitude that older persons can not be stereotyped, that they hold several cards yet in their hands, and that a risk-free environment will encourage playing these out. Education has the greatest potential for the older person. When the context is rich and supportive, older persons have the greatest work to do. They have the developmental mandate to make sense of life, to leave a legacy of meaning and trust to coming generations, and to say that their lives have meant and continue to mean something. They want to be fully alive. What finer role can education play?

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